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WARNING ANIMALS

BY ALEXANDER H. KRAPPE

It is one of the most common and most widely spread beliefs that animals have the faculty of sensing things which escape the notice of man. As the Arabs put it, animals are *mamûr*, i.e. they act under supernatural impulses; their eyes are wide open when those of man are closed. This belief, like many others of the same type, is based upon fact; for it is well known that the sensory organs of most animals are superior to those of man; a dog has a keener scent, a bird of prey much sharper sight, a cat a finer ear than man. From such well ascertained facts man boldly generalized, assuming that animals and birds, owing to this superiority of theirs, are able to convey useful warnings. It is therefore in man's interest to pay close attention to the behaviour of dumb creation. The result of this generalization was the multitude of divinatory practices based on the cries of animals, the flight of birds, etc. Birds, in particular, play a preponderant rôle in stories recounting such salutary warnings.

In an Icelandic tradition a raven warns a holy bishop, absorbed in prayer, of an imminent landslide. Understanding the voice of the bird, the man of God removed hence, just in time to escape certain death.¹ A variant of the tale has it that the raven induces a young girl, the kind-hearted daughter of a godless farmer, to follow it farther and farther, away up a hill, so as to be out of danger when the landslide overwhelms her father's farm.²

There is a curiously similar story current in Normandy (départ. Côtes-du-Nord), which reads as follows:³

"At Gros-Moëlan there once stood the castle of an impious lord of rather strongly anticlerical convictions. He was in fact so radical that on one occasion he dared interrupt the service of the mass by threatening the officiating priest. He had in his service a very devout girl who, after witnessing the scene, hurried out of the church to go home. No sooner had she arrived there than she was warned by a bird which sang: 'Pack your clothes! Pack your clothes and save yourself?' She did so and ran

¹ Paul Herrmann, *Island in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Leipzig, 1907, II, 172.

² Konrad Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart*, Leipzig, 1860, p. 205; M. Lehmann-Filhés, *Isländische Volkssagen*, Berlin, 1889-91, II, 7; G. E. J. Powell and E. Magnússon, *Icelandic Legends*, London, 1866, II, 53.

³ *Revue des Traditions populaires*, XII (1897), pp. 132 f.

away. Immediately after, the castle was overthrown by an invisible power, burying the evil lord in its ruins."

A second French version is localized near the village of Goven (dép. Ille-et-Vilaine) and is attached to a lord of Gourmallon. The tale is much the same; but the bird warns the girl by fluttering in front of her as she is on her way back to the castle, preventing her from entering through the gate. She heeds the warning, and the castle crumbles with a terrifying noise.⁴

It is obvious that these traditions, the Icelandic and the Norman-Breton, are somehow connected. The Icelandic texts go back to the seventeenth century; but the tradition they embody is older still, as it presupposes the existence of Catholicism in Iceland, while the warning raven is clearly a pagan, not a Christian, bird. It is on the whole likely that Norse settlers are responsible for the occurrence of the tale in north-western France, and it is well to note that this story is by no means the only example of Norse traditions in this part of France.⁵

Fairly closely related to these Icelandic and Breton traditions appears to be a Welsh legend telling how a harper is warned by a little bird which, as it were, beckons him to a hill-top, much as does the raven in the Icelandic story. No sooner has he reached the top than a catastrophe overwhelms the city in the valley, notorious for the wickedness of its inhabitants. The valley is now covered by the waters of Bala Lake (Llyn Tegid).⁶

A similar tradition has been found near the village of Musen, in Westphalia. On a hill nearby known as Almerich there stood once upon a time a city which had grown so rich that the inhabitants used good wheat bread to make ploughwheels and toys of.⁷ Then one day a little bird came flying and began to speak with a human voice, warning the people that their city would be swallowed up. When they turned a deaf ear to these warnings the bird predicted that on the following day a wolf leading a flock of sheep would enter through the gates. The miracle did happen, but the people did not heed it. Then, on the day after, the city was swallowed up with all its inhabitants.⁸

Warning birds are of frequent occurrence in ballad poetry. Thus the

⁴ Paul, Sébillot, *Traditions et superstitions de la Haute-Bretagne*, Paris, 1882, I, 358.

⁵ *Scandinavian Studies*, XVII (1942), pp. 30 f.

⁶ T. Gwynn Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk-Custom*, London (1930), p. 102; Sir John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx*, Oxford, 1901, II, 408 f.

⁷ On this very popular theme, cf. my *Science of Folk-Lore*, London, 1930, p. 85.

⁸ A. Kuhn, *Sagen, Gebräuche und Märchen aus Westfalen*, Leipzig, 1859, I, 168; cf. René Basset, *Revue des traditions populaires*, XIX (1904), p. 17.

German ballad of Ulinger, a sort of Blue-Beard, has a dove warn the victim of her impending doom.⁹

When Lycophron (*Alex.*, 146) calls Cassandra "a swallow possessed by Phoebus", this metaphor presupposes a belief that these birds have the faculty of warning man of approaching dangers, a belief attested also by Arrian (*Anab.*, I. 25, 6-8) as shared by the great Alexander on a memorable occasion.

Even more direct is the interference of an eagle which, in a well-known fable, upsets a cup which it knew to be filled with poison, thus saving a man's life.¹⁰

In another fable, an eagle swoops down and takes a man's hat, thus inducing him to follow and to get to a safe distance from a wall about to collapse.¹¹

In the New World an eagle warns the Pima Indians in Arizona of an impending flood.¹²

In a widely spread *märchen* (Grimm, No. 40) a bird in a cage warns a miller's daughter, who had been enticed into a robbers' den, to flee before it is too late.¹³

Animals lower down the scale drawn up by zoologists occasionally fill a like useful function. Thus in a tale from Upper Brittany a lizard warns a sleeper of an approaching viper by tickling his ear.¹⁴ In a Dutch tradition a serpent warns a man sleeping in a garden that a burglar has broken into his house and killed his small child.¹⁵ In an Oriental story a flea, knowing that a robbery is to be carried out in the king's palace, by biting His Majesty awakens him and thus foils the robbers' wicked plan.¹⁶ If in the Indian variants of the Great Flood a fish warns Manu of the impending catastrophe,¹⁷ this feature does not denote any special prophetic powers attributed to fish, but is to be explained as the logical result of the peculiar nature of the calamity: fish may be presumed to know more about a coming flood than a land animal.

⁹ F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Boston, 1883-98, I (1), pp. 31 ff.; 37; II (2), pp. 496 f.; IV (2), p. 441.

¹⁰ Aesop, ed. Halm, No. 120; cf. W. Wienert, *Die Typen der griechisch-römischen Fabel*, Helsinki, 1925, pp. 70 and 127 (*FF Communications*, No. 56).

¹¹ Babrios, No. 144; Aesop, ed. cit., No. 92; Wienert, *op. et loc. cit.*

¹² H. H. Bancroft, *The Native Races of the Pacific States*, III (San Francisco, 1883), pp. 78 f.

¹³ E. Cosquin, *Contes populaires de Lorraine*, Paris (1886), I, 184.

¹⁴ Sébillot, *op. cit.*, II, 239.

¹⁵ J. W. Wolf, *Deutsche Märchen und Sagen*, Leipzig, 1845, p. 493.

¹⁶ V. Chauvin, *Bibliographie*, II, 197, No. 29.

¹⁷ Sir James G. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, London, 1918, I, 183 ff.

It is, however, in the nature of things that the place of honour would be reserved for man's familiar companions, above all to the horse. This is especially true of the epic tradition, in which the animal is virtually inseparable from its master, the knight and hero. All lovers of the mediaeval epic and its derivatives are familiar with the faithful Bayard, who awakens its masters, the four sons of Aymon, by striking a shield with its hoof.¹⁸ Similarly, in a Bulgarian ballad the horse of Marko Kraljevič awakens its master by scratching the ground with its right foot and then addresses him in human speech, warning him of the approaching enemy.¹⁹ In the Russian ballad of Ilia of Murom the hero, asleep in his tent, is about to be slain by his own daughter, intent on avenging her mother's dishonour, when his faithful steed awakens him in time.²⁰ Again, in the ballads of Jeruslan Lazarevich the hero's horse, perceiving the Tartars in pursuit of its master, awakens him by neighing loudly.²¹ In a tradition from the Caucasus the loyal horse Rashi stands on guard over its sleeping master, the hero Amiran, and wakes him up at the approach of devils.²² Much the same story is told of the hero Abrskil and his good horse Arash.²³ Both these epic steeds are, of course, identical with Raksh, the horse of Rustem in Firdousi's *Book of Kings*, which awakens its master at the approach of a dragon.²⁴ The same episode occurs in the MHG epics of *Ortnit* and *Wilfdietrich*, and Ludwig Uhland²⁵ was probably right in conjecturing that this is not a mere coincidence.

Other domestic animals occur occasionally as warners. Quite in the epic tradition is the rôle of a dog in a Nigerian story: two witch dogs awaken their master by loud barks at the approach of the witch wife intent on slaying him.²⁶ The Cherokee Indians are warned by a dog of the impending flood.²⁷ In Peru, a llama (the only domestic animal of the South American Indians) discharges the same function.²⁸

Even wild and dangerous animals sometimes assume such a useful rôle. The poet Al-Kumait, on his flight from Kufa, befriended a wolf he met in

¹⁸ J. Bédier, *Les légendes épiques*, Paris, 1921, IV, 202.

¹⁹ E. Strauss, *Die Bulgaren*, Leipzig, 1898, p. 219.

²⁰ A. Rambaud, *La Russie épique*, Paris, 1876, p. 56.

²¹ A. Dietrich, *Russian Popular Tales*, London, 1857, p. 206.

²² A. Durr, *Kaukasische Märchen*, Jena, 1920, p. 240.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

²⁴ Trad. Mohl, I, 409 ff.

²⁵ *Schriften*, I, 178. Cf. H. Schneider, *Die Gedichte und die Sage von Wolf-dietrich*, München, 1913, pp. 7 and 293.

²⁶ P. A. Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, London, 1912, p. 252.

²⁷ H. R. Schoolcraft, *Notes on the Iroquois*, Albany, 1847, pp. 358 f.

²⁸ Frazer, *op. cit.*, I, 270.

the desert. Starting out again after a short rest, he and his companions were startled by the animal's howling: they took the hint and changed their route, whereupon the wolf kept still.²⁹

It is clear, of course, that in the stories reviewed we deal largely with generalizations, and no-one will take the royal flea of the Indian story too seriously. The question is merely whether stories relating such acts of higher animals have a basis in fact and may be said to be derived from sound observations. This question must be answered in the affirmative. Friends of animals will quote any number of more or less authentic stories bearing out this point. One, unusually well attested, must here suffice. It is reported by Baron Ring, Minister plenipotentiary of France in Egypt. On passing near some dense shrubbery, he noticed his cat mewing pitifully, trying to bar the road and finally pulling him by his trouser leg. Subsequent search revealed one of the most poisonous snakes of Egypt hidden under the bushes.³⁰

A different group of traditions is formed by stories in which no claim is made for any special virtue of kindness toward man on the part of the animal. The situation is far more simple: the animal, foreseeing an impending danger by which it would be overwhelmed, takes proper precautionary measures. Man, if wise, heeds these and thus escapes the danger.

Brand records the even now widely held belief³¹ that rats will abandon a doomed ship. It has its parallel in China, where the Meh Janang or Ship's Serpent, a tame snake kept on board the Chinese junks, is credited with much the same perspicacity as the rats of European vessels.³² Brand adds that rats are said to leave a house before some dismal accident, a superstition recorded by Pliny, who states that mice will leave houses threatened with destruction, a superstition still very much alive in modern folklore.³³ Cicero, who cannot be accused of excessive credulity, in a letter to Atticus (XIV, 9, 1) writes that the mice left two *tabernae* of his, which were in poor condition and in danger of collapsing. It is a current belief with the Slovaks that mice will leave a house about to be struck by lightning.³⁴ A Franconian tradition tells of the donkey of a water-carrier which obstinately refused to climb a certain mountain,

²⁹ J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, Berlin, 1897, p. 201.

³⁰ A. Fouillée, *Les éléments sociologiques de la morale*, Paris, 1928, p. 129, n. 2.

³¹ Emma Phipson, *The Animal-Lore of Shakespeare's Time*, London, 1883, p. 150.

³² A. Bastian, *Die Völker des östlichen Asien*, Jena, 1866-71, III, 253.

³³ *N.H.*, VIII, 42; cf. Aelian, *Var. Hist.*, I, 11; *Hist. anim.*, VI, 41; Sébillot, *Le Folk-Lore de France*, III, 25 f.

³⁴ J. V. Grohmann, *Apollo Smintheus*, Prag, 1862, p. 48.

uttering pitiable cries when its master attempted to force it. On finally reaching the top of the mountain, the man becomes aware that the castle which stood there had been swallowed up.³⁵

Frequently such power of foreseeing coming catastrophes is attributed to birds. A sixteenth century chronicler of the Principality of Baden reports that a stork which used to have its nest in the steeple of the church of Dentzingen, broke it up and carried it to the gallows when the church was converted into a Protestant chapel.³⁶ In this form the story all too clearly betrays the bigotry of the chronicler; but he followed a tradition considerably older than the Reformation. In the same region we hear, in the following century, that just prior to the French invasion (under Louis XIV) all storks on the right bank of the Rhine (Baden-Durlach and elsewhere) left their nests and even their young ones, as though they foresaw the coming devastation.³⁷ Again we hear that at the approach of the plague in Metz and Geneva (1542) the birds left their nests and flew away.³⁸ Among Swiss country folk an early departure of migratory birds means war. Similarly, if storks leave their nests and move to other nests constructed hurriedly on trees in the field, it is a sign of impending war.³⁹ In Scotland, when crows of their own accord remove their nesting places from an estate, it augurs ill for the owner.⁴⁰ In Germany it is believed that when storks leave their nests forever, a fire or some other calamity is impending.⁴¹

The truly venerable age of these beliefs is best seen from a story told by Cassiodorus and Procopius in connection with the siege of Aquileia, in A.D. 452, by Attila, king of the Huns. This is what Procopius of Caesarea has to say on the subject:⁴²

"Aquileia defended itself stubbornly, and Attila had already given up hope of taking it, when he beheld a single male stork, which had its nest on a certain tower of the city wall, suddenly rise and leave the place with its young. Attila interpreted this as foreboding some evil shortly to befall the place. Nor did his surmise prove false: soon afterwards the

³⁵ L. Bechstein, *Die Sagen des Rhöngebirges und des Grabfeldes*, Würzburg, 1842, pp. 267 f.

³⁶ A. Birlinger, *Allemania*, XI (1881), p. 253.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ J. B. Friedreich, *Die Realien in der Iliade und Odyssee*, Erlangen, 1856, p. 171, n.

³⁹ H. Bächtold, *Schweizerisches Archiv f. Volkskunde*, XIX (1915), p. 209.

⁴⁰ J. M. McPherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland*, London, 1929, p. 163.

⁴¹ Kurt Heckscher, *Die Volkskunde des germanischen Kulturkreises*, Hamburg, 1925, pp. 132 and 388.

⁴² Procop., *Bell. Vand.*, I, 4, 32-5.

very part of the wall which held the nest of the bird, for no apparent reason suddenly collapsed, and the Huns, entering through the breach took the city by storm."

Jordanes (42), who reproduces the lost account of Cassiodorus, tells much the same story, except that Attila's soldiers are getting tired of the long siege when the king, noticing that the storks which had their nests in the gables of houses, were bearing their young from the city, to carry them out into the country, pointed this out to the restive men: "You see the birds foresee the future. They are leaving the city sure to perish and are forsaking strongholds doomed to fall by reason of imminent peril." His interpretation is borne out by the events: the city is taken and utterly destroyed.

Of these two versions the former is intrinsically more probable. It obviously belongs to the same class of stories of animals leaving a house about to collapse. We shall presently discover the full bearing of this.

There was current in ancient Greece a tradition to the effect that mice, weasels, and snakes were seen to emigrate from the city of Helice, in Achaia, five days before the earthquake which was to engulf it.⁴³ The truth of the tradition, which has occasionally been ridiculed by rationalist writers, is borne out by the modern observations of men whose good faith cannot be doubted.

A few examples must suffice for many. On December 28th, 1908, there occurred one of the greatest natural catastrophes of the century, the earthquake of Messina, which was preceded by a number of ominous signs:

"After midnight there was a half-hour period when cattle seemed agitated. Horses neighed in their stalls. An unusual howling of dogs was to be heard. In the darkness birds took to wheeling flight or uttered notes of alarm. For a distance of 100 miles these symptoms were noted, and were later attributed to microseismic movements."⁴⁴

Such observations are by no means modern. In connection with the terrible earthquake of February 9th, 1783, which laid a large part of Calabria in ruins, we are told:

"Nothing in nature seemed to indicate the approaching danger. . . . The animals, however—all witnesses are agreed on this point—gave signs of a strange and unexplainable fright. The fowls of the chicken-yards were confusedly agitated, fluttering about frightened and cackling, as if

⁴³ Aelian, *Hist. anim.*, XI, 19.

⁴⁴ W. F. Palmer, *The American Mercury*, XLIV (1938), No. 173, p. 318; cf. also Jean Carrière, *La Terre tremblante*, Paris, 1909, pp. 18 f.

they were trying to escape from some danger. The horses sniffed the ground with a sort of anguish, pricked up their ears, reared, and neighed without apparent cause. In the stables the cattle lowed, their hair standing on ends, and spread their four legs as if they were trying to obtain a firmer foot-hold. The cats were leaving the houses as though they were in danger of impending collapse. The dogs, downcast and restless, were howling as if they were announcing some impending death. All these manifestations of the instinct of animals, mysteriously warned by something which escaped the observation of man, were understood after the event. Before the quake no attention was paid to them, or rather, people were astonished by what they saw but did not take the warning which, had it been followed, might have saved many." ⁴⁵

What is true of earthquakes, i.e. the fact that they are preceded by microseismic waves perceptible to animals, though not to man, is likely to be equally true in the case of buildings about to collapse. The final collapse seems to be preceded by vibrations perfectly perceptible to cats, mice, and even smaller animals. Seen in this light, the timely flight of the stork of Aquileia as reported by Procopius of Caesarea becomes quite understandable.

Not susceptible to such an explanation are the traditions according to which animals are credited with the ability to foresee invasions, epidemics, and similar calamities. Again we may be dealing with a bold generalization. At all events, the available evidence is not nearly sufficient to pass judgment on the subject.

Summing up the conclusions which may legitimately be drawn from the material assembled, we may say that the theme of the Warning Animals, like so many other folklore themes, has a basis in fact: on the one hand the well-attested cases in which higher domestic animals have given their human masters timely warnings, on the other, the equally well-attested ability of animals to sense coming danger from certain forerunners, of a physical nature, not perceptible to man. Progressive generalization, working from this basis (which is by no means a narrow one) very probably accounts for the rest.

⁴⁵ Francois Lenormant, *La Grande-Grèce*, Paris, 1881-4, III, 343.